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## A HEBREW POLITICAL ROMANCE.

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*The neglect of the Apocrypha and what is lost by it.—A Jewish novel in the book of Judith.—Date and plan of the book.—Historical material adapted in the plot.—The story of the book.—Its influence on the national history of the Jews.—Its teachings as to Jewish thought and theology of its time.*

In the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, and also in some copies of our English Bible there are certain books called collectively the Apocrypha. These books, because, perhaps, they are regarded as not belonging to the canon of scripture by protestant Christianity, have been little read or studied, and generally considered worthless, as though the Jewish mind could produce nothing of worth from a purely literary point of view. In maintaining this attitude toward these books I think that we have deprived ourselves of a great deal. The Apocrypha may have very little value as far as immediate religious matters are concerned, but it has very great value, a value altogether too lightly esteemed, in other directions. The books composing it are valuable as the literary remains of a great people during an exceedingly important period of their history. But for these writings nearly four hundred years of Jewish history would be wrapped in almost impenetrable obscurity. They contain history, traditions, and almost, if not quite, all the romance written by the Jews. We have here especially a revelation of the public mind; the inner thought of the people during these "four centuries of silence."

The historical books of the Old Testament give us a very vivid, and, at the same time, very accurate account of Jewish history. The prophetic books are filled with the highest ideals of the greatest Jewish thinkers. The Old Testament as a whole may, I think, be justly termed the Israelito-pædia, or the education and training of the Israelites from the childhood of the

race. But about four hundred years before this nation is finally scattered to the four corners of the earth, the canon of the Old Testament closes. It is very important for the student of history, and especially of religious history, to learn something of this period. We can learn from various sources how the Jews were acted upon. We know from other history how, for a long time, Palestine was between the upper and the nether mill-stone. But what were their thoughts, and feelings, and hopes, and fears during these four hundred years, while this grind of contending armies was in progress? The Apocryphal books partly answer this question.

In looking over these writings, we find some things for which we are hardly prepared. We have not been in the habit of thinking of the Jew as a novelist, and yet here in the heart of the Apocrypha is without doubt a Hebrew novel, called the Book of Judith. The writer, as is frequently the case in Jewish writings, is unknown. The book has another peculiar Jewish trait in that it is without date. Many efforts have been made to determine the time at which it was written, but as there are great difficulties connected with whatever date is assigned, none has, up to the present time, been agreed upon. My own opinion is that it was written during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes. This strange character, who was called indifferently the illustrious or the crazy, was one of the most bitter enemies the Jews ever had. Not only was he their political enemy, but what was far worse, he was the determined opposer of their religion. His avowed policy was to endeavor to force the Jews to abandon the worship of Jehovah. This, of course, aroused the nation as nothing else could do. The Maccabean war shows how the whole nation felt on this subject.

There had been a great literary revival among the Jews. The sacred writings were more widely read, and more devoutly pondered than they had ever been before. The minds of the people were filled with the traditions of the race. What was more natural than for one, more gifted perhaps than others, to undertake to write a political romance, based in a measure upon the old-time stories, with ideal names, and yet so plain to those

who read it that they could easily see the meaning, and possibly be led to undertake to repeat the acts of their great ancestors who had subdued armies far outnumbering their own? I believe this to be the key to the Book of Judith.

Twice, at critical periods of Israelitish history, woman played an exceedingly important part. Once, in the early history of the nation, Deborah, the energetic Bee, a woman of great sagacity and of unusual courage stirred up the frightened people to make war on their enemies. The battle was successful. Another woman, by a subtle subterfuge, slew, in her own tent, the leader of the opposing host, and the names of Deborah and Jael were embalmed in song, and held ever after in high esteem.

At another time, when the life of the nation was in great jeopardy, Esther, the beautiful star, by her beauty, her sagacity, her charming manners, her fidelity to the interests of her people, succeeded in having the decree for their destruction annulled. It is not strange, then, that one who wished to write a story for the purpose of stirring up the nation to strike for both civil and religious liberty, should make it the story of the prowess of a woman, and should make that woman a composite of Deborah, Jael, and Esther.

The theme of this story is the victory over an all-conquering king through the strategy of a woman. The prominent figures are Olophernes, the commander of the forces of Nebuchodonosor; and Judith, a beautiful Jewish widow. The minor figures are the chief men of Betulua, the home of Judith; an Ammonite prophet named Achior; the maid who waits on Judith; the townsmen and soldiers.

The historical happenings, which seem to have been worked up by the writer into this story, are the defeat of Sisera, and that defeat of the Assyrian host so graphically poetized by Byron. Like the Rabshakeh sent to the gates of the city to demand a surrender to the Assyrian king, and who declares that no power has hitherto been able to stop the army of his master, so Olophernes boasts here of the greatness of the conquests of Nebuchodonosor, and declares that the Jews shall likewise be forced to submit to him. The writer, with due attention to

details, and yet without wearying the reader as some modern novelists have done, vividly depicts the siege. He speaks of the refusal to submit to the demands of Olophernes; of Balaam-like utterances of the Ammonite prophet; with just enough of the condition of the besieged to keep the interest fully alive. Gradually, and quite artistically, the climax of the story is reached. The inhabitants of the town come before the chiefs and tell their piteous tale. The water supply has been cut off, the most terrible thing that could happen to the city. Each day brings added suffering. What can be done? Final surrender seems inevitable, and, since this is the case, why not surrender at once, and not add the pangs of hunger and thirst; the sorrow of seeing children die of starvation, to the pangs of an all-too-certain slavery. The matter was duly considered, and it was determined to wait five days longer, and if relief was not afforded in some way to surrender the town.

In this dire extremity, like Deborah, and Esther, Judith appears. She is described as a beautiful widow, who, after the death of her husband, had lived a very pious and secluded life, and had evinced her devotion to the memory of her dead lord by wearing only the coarsest kind of clothing. She does not reveal her plan to the chief, but induces him to trust the whole matter to her, and declares her willingness to undertake to save her people. Her scheme is a woman's. It is, however, the scheme of a woman who is fired with fanaticism, and who firmly believes that any deception practiced against those who are laying siege to her town; or who are the avowed enemies of her faith; or any deed, however atrocious in itself, if levelled against her enemies, is entirely justifiable. She discards her coarse raiment, and after perfuming herself after the manner of her people, arrays herself so as to set off her attractive person to the best advantage, and armed only with her beauty and her sagacity, goes forth to conquer the great army of the great king. Ah! Olophernes, as thou art a man, verily is thy danger great! What weapons of war have ever yet been forged of material strong enough to conquer the marvellous might of beauty!

Taking her maid with her, Judith goes out of the city gate,

and on down into the camp of the hostile army. Representing herself as one whose purpose it is to deliver the Jews into the hands of their enemies, she gains entrance to the tent of Olophernes. The man of war is at once taken captive by her beauty, and eagerly listens to all she has to tell. By prudence, she completely disarms whatever suspicion might have been awakened, and on the third night, while the commander is in a drunken stupor, like Jael of old, she murders him, and carries his head in triumph to the city. The morning dawns. The besiegers learn what has taken place, and are filled with such terror that they are easily defeated, and Israel is once more free. Judith is praised by all the people, and lives to a good old age, dies in peace, and is mourned for publicly by the entire nation. Such is the brief outline of this very interesting Hebrew romance.

If my theory of the time of its composition is true, who knows how much it might have had to do with the great uprising of the people under the Maccabees? We know what part Uncle Tom's Cabin played in the history of the late war, and it is more than a mere fancy that sees in this novel a power to stir the hearts of the people of Israel.

As to the value of this story as a reflection of the national mind, it shows the depth of that patriotism in which the Jews have ever excelled. Never has the world seen a nation possessed of deeper devotion to their race or to their native land. It is true that the ideas of God possessed by the heroine were both crude and erroneous, yet the story calls attention to one fact that shows that in the heart of the nation there lay a great truth. Achior, standing in the presence of Olophernes says that the Israelites can never be conquered by his army unless they have committed some sin, for which it may be necessary for them to suffer. Judith, when she visits the commander makes the same statement. The nation felt during these last years the truth spoken by the prophets in other years, that the real cause of Israel's suffering was Israel's sin, and if as a nation they maintained their integrity, maintained national purity, and a faith in God that revealed itself in outwardly noble lives, then the perpetuity of the nation would be secured.

Thus this Hebrew Romance telling of the triumph of Judith who possessed the beauty of Esther, the wisdom and sagacity of Deborah, and the stern unwomanly heart of Jael, throws light back upon the history of Israel, and throws light within that period of time during which the Jews became a nation in a sense in which they had never been a nation before.